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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a longitudinal study of 10 racially mixed secondary schools across the country where the leadership decided to move toward reducing ability grouping or tracking in their school. Examples of the schools under study included an Appalachian school in a moderately-sized city and a wealthy suburban school of a large metropolitan area of the Midwest. It is not possible to understand the change process in a school without understanding the social, political, and historical context within which the school exists. Research on education politics and policy making at the local level showed that community type and the issues being debated affect the decision making process. Contains 19 references. (EH)

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The Importance of Understanding the Social, Political and Historical Context of Education Reform:

How Much is Enough?

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Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting
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Introduction

School reform efforts are currently a much studied phenomenon in the field of education research. We, like many others, are trying to understand the process of change in schools. Specifically, we are engaged in a study of ten schools across the country, investigating what happens when someone with power in a racially mixed secondary school decides to move toward reducing ability grouping or tracking in their school. In this paper, we argue that it is not possible to understand the change process in a school without understanding the social, political and historical context within which the school exists.

Generally, researchers have carried out one of two types of studies on school change: those examining the social and political context of schools, especially decision-making processes at the local level; and those which focus on change processes within schools. However, we have found few studies that connect these two areas, mainly because research interests tend to break out by the discipline of the researchers engaged in them. Research addressing influences on school board elections, the power of superintendents, or what sort of education issues arise in which types of communities typically is done by political scientists and sociologists, who are interested in decisionmaking processes and conflicts. At the same time, education researchers and anthropologists primarily have been concerned with studying what happens within schools and classrooms.

We are trying to bring these two approaches to studying school change together; we are striving to understand the relationship between the local social, political and historical context and the school-level change process in order to have a clearer conception of how school reform happens. We have taken a multidisciplinary approach, both in the methods we apply and the literature we have used to inform our study. However, we have run into questions of how best to understand the broader socio-political and historical context of education in the communities in which our schools are located, and its influence on our schools, given the limited time we have in each school. We have had to balance our time and resources between getting at this context of schooling as opposed to finding out what is happening within the school.

Nonetheless, we believe that it is critical that we understand the social, political and historical context of school change because this context affects how educators make sense of what they do, as well as their perceptions of their students. Without this

- there is a significant potential for misinterpreting what people say in schools,
- we cannot understand why people in our schools do what they do,
- we cannot fully understand our interviewees' ideologies, referents or symbols,
- we will not understand where the impetus for particular changes arose, or where the greatest resistance to change lies, and
- we cannot fully understand the past experiences of people in these schools, and how they affect current change efforts.

It is also important that we triangulate our findings by getting an external perspective about what is happening in our schools. While we do not doubt that persons in the schools are telling us the truth, we do not know if we are getting "the whole truth," or even that there is one right truth. Often there are subtexts to what is going on in these schools, and we can only get at these by talking with people outside of the schools or by looking at the external context influencing the schools.

We believe that our work in this paper is both important and timely, given the recent movement toward decentralization in education policy. Until the middle of the 20th century, education fell under local control and most research on policymaking focused on local control issues like school board elections or power relationships in the district. However, in the 1960s and 1970s decisionmaking and funding authority shifted first to the federal, and then to the state level, and consequently the attention of researchers shifted to federal and state level policymaking. Now, however, the pendulum is swinging back toward decentralization and local control, as demonstrated by movements like charter schools and open enrollment. Therefore it is critical that researchers refocus their attention to local the context of education (Tyack, 1993).

At the same time, some educational researchers who have traditionally focused on school-site change have seen the need for a broader contextual perspective. Seymour Sarason (1982)

argues that it does not make sense to discuss schools as a closed system, or to exclude persons external to the school site in any effort to comprehend them. He warns that in order to create successful change efforts, schools have to have, "a realistically complicated picture of the formal and informal networks in which schools and school systems are embedded" (p. 11). We are trying to create this complicated picture of the reform efforts underway in the schools we are studying, by delving into the contexts within which these schools operate. Our dilemma is, though, how far do we go in studying the context?

The remainder of this paper will present an overview of the traditions of research on local school reform, and the weaknesses inherent in much of the work preceding our study. We also review some of the literature supporting our approach of studying both within-school change processes and the social, political and historical contexts that influence these processes. We then discuss how we are attempting to understand these contexts in or school, and present two example of why this has been important in our study.

History of Research on Local Political Contexts and School Reform

Over the last 40 years, two parallel but separate strands of educational research have influenced the way we think about policy making and implementation at the local level. The first strand, the politics of education within districts and the more general social and historical context of educational decision-making, has been conducted mainly by political scientists and some sociologists of education. This area of research was more prevalent in the 60s and the early 70s before funding and, therefore, decision-making shifted away from local districts to state departments of education. Following this shift, researchers altered their focus, leaving the local context relatively unexamined (Burlingame, 1988 and Mitchell, 1988).

The second strand, focusing on the process of understanding and changing schools (Lieberman, 1982), was more often conducted by educational researchers and anthropologists, and has flourished in recent years with the growth of the school change literature.

We argue that while the connection between these two bodies of literature has been weak at best, both inform our research on detracking at the school level and both could contribute to other case study research in education. We will describe briefly each of these parallel strands, with a special emphasis on the first because it is less prevalent in the more recent literature and deserves reconsideration in light of current efforts to decentralize educational governance to the school and district level.

In the late 1950s, political scientists and sociologists of education began to apply power structure theory as it related to educational decision-making at the district and school level. Burlingame (1988) points out that by the 1960s, research on education policy was heavily focused on local school politics. Much of the early research in this area examined differences in the community power structures as an independent variable that impacted political relationships, policy making, and the role of the school board and superintendent (Bidwell and Kasarda, 1975; McCarty & Ramsey, 1971; Zeigler, Jennings & Peak, 1974; and Minar, 1966).

Thus, community characteristics such as degree of urbanicity, size of city or town, socio-economic status and race of constituents, heterogeneity of the community, and level of community involvement were all found to have a measurable impact on the way in which local educational policy decisions were made. In large urban school districts policy makers were generally unresponsive to the needs of their mostly poor and often non-white constituents, whereas studies of suburban districts concluded that the decision making processes varied greatly depending on the socioeconomic level of the community. For example, researchers reported that higher SES suburban school districts managed conflict better than lower SES communities; constituents in higher SES districts also showed greater deference to the "educational" expertise of professional educators (Burlingame, 1988).

The issue of level of deference to educational experts is one that Boyd (1976) has examined, and he argues that there were two common ways of looking at educational policy making at the local level. One argument, the conflict control type hypothesis, states that most American school systems support the values of the dominant class and argues that school boards,

controlled by the business elite and the affluent, simply carry out the demands of their social class and its constituent communities. The other argument claims that professional educators make decisions and have a great deal of control. According to Boyd, neither one is an absolute, and that the degree of deference to professionals will vary with type of school district as well as the type of policy under consideration. In this way, Boyd pushed the study the local policy making further to include an additional independent variable: the policy being discussed.

Thus, much of this literature on the politics of education at the local level focuses on power struggles between school boards and professional educators and how these struggles varied by type of community and the current policy issue, but does not go the next step, which would be to show how these power struggles (or lack thereof) impact the schools, the classrooms, instruction, and most importantly, student outcomes. There are at least three reasons why the political scientists and sociologists of education did not take this next step: they lacked the expertise to study learning and instruction, it wasn't their focus or interest, and it was too messy and difficult to assess. These researchers were not experts in curriculum or pedagogy, and they avoided studying the relationship between policy decisions at the school board level to what was happening in the proverbial black box. In addition, as statistical methods were refined, and large scale data analysis became feasible through improved technology, the research conducted by political scientists and sociologists on the politics of education became more quantitative, and thus even further removed from the school context and culture.

Furthermore, the sociologists and political scientists who studied the politics of local decision making in education tended to rely on organizational theory or systems analysis -- a more rational, less contextual approach that often underestimates the influence of norms and culture in the political process. According to Hawley (1977), "modern" political science is rooted in commitments to research and writing that sought to compare what *is*, at least implicitly, to what *should be* with the prescriptions derived from normative political and organization theory. "Thus, we have seen ourselves dealing with the 'big' questions of democratic political philosophy...often without questioning the assumptions we tacitly make about consequences of these phenomena"

(p. 333). In other words, politics of education researchers were fascinated by the process of decision making at the district level without concerning themselves with the consequences of those decisions for the students these boards were supposed to serve.

Burlingame (1988), for instance, in his review of literature on the politics of education and the creation of education policy at the local level, omits any discussion of how with the process of policy making or the policies themselves impacted the education received by students or the quality of life as lived and experienced by teachers and administrators in the schools. There are no recommendations on how to make these connections, nor indications that any of the persons he cited considered this an area of concern.

What we have learned from this literature, therefore, is that while it is extremely important for us to understand this political and social context, our study of detracking forces us to connect these context variables to the school site. It isn't enough simply to study what goes on within the schools or how the culture of schools inhibit or enhance reform efforts, but that with a volatile and highly political issue such as tracking and ability grouping, we could not ignore the politics of education at the district level.

The theoretical and empirical gap between those who study the local political environment and those who study the school change process within schools is perpetuated by researchers in both camps. Just as political scientists and sociologists fail to link their work on the politics of education to what happens in schools, so have the education researchers and anthropologists who study individual classrooms and school sites frequently failed to examine larger political, historical and social context of the district and communities in which these schools reside.

Ramsey (1978), discusses how ethnographic studies of classrooms are narrowly focused, often ignoring "the important 'holistic' relationships that should be the hallmark of anthropological studies" (p. 2). She notes, for instance, that "few anthropologists discuss the school as part of a school district...The notion that the school board is a culture unto itself, though part of the general society, is one that is generally strange to them" (p. 3).

Ramsey further criticizes anthropological studies of schools because anthropologists often fail to see the school as part of a network, with variations within a larger pattern. She argues that while teachers and classrooms are important, the key to understanding any social-cultural system is looking at its "variables, patterns of systematic relationships, and the participants and the environmental network that supports the system." (p. 3)

Ramsey posits that this missing focus of anthropological school change and school culture research is due to the researches lack of access to the social system and also his or her lack of credentials or experience to be an on-the-spot, native-superintendent, participant/observer. In contrast to the work done by political scientists and sociologists of education most of whom have never been teachers and have little expertise in classroom practices, much of this research done in schools, she argues, is conducted by former or soon-to-be teachers who lack expertise in power-structure theories that inform an understanding of district level politics. She adds that anthropologists tend to be limited by their training, lack of knowledge and/or interest in educational bureaucracies, and an unwillingness to accept educators doing anthropological research.

Similarly, Lieberman (1982) noted that while educational researchers have built a large body of literature on the complex process of school change, for the most part, this literature has failed to make an impact on large-scale policy at the federal, state and local levels. In recent years, educational policy research has focused more carefully on the links between federal and state programs and policies and how they are implemented at the school level, but these policy researchers have not for the most part examined the local political, historical and social context of the school change process.

Even the more recent and rapidly growing educational literature on the school change process, which discusses the impact of the district office and the school board on school-level reform, often fails to incorporate historical and social components of the context outside the school and exhibits the same weaknesses as the earlier politics of education literature in its more rational, systematic approach to describing political context (see for example, Fullan, 1991).

The Importance of Context

A number of researchers have argued for incorporating an exploration of context into school change research. Hawley (1977) argues that it is critical to identify and understand the links between political decisionmaking in education and the effect of the decisions on students in the classroom. He offers two reasons why this is so important, one which is more practical, and one which is more philosophical. First, if researchers neglect the consequences of political processes and behavior on schools, their explanations of processes and behaviors in schools will be limited. Second, by ignoring political outcomes researchers limit the potential contributions they can make to developing a more just society, however defined. In attempting to explain how education reform happens, our research has an underlying goal of supporting future reform efforts. Hawley's arguments are therefore particularly relevant to our work.

Hawley discusses some of the shortcomings of policy formulation and policy outputs research, critiquing the work that most closely resembles our research, implementation studies and evaluations of policy impact. He notes that studies of policy implementation, while increasing the sophistication of political analysis, still focus on how policy is formulated, and rarely address how policies affect those who are supposed to be served or regulated. Moreover, they seldom consider whether alternative patterns of decisionmaking might create different outcomes. On the other hand, he argues that most policy impact studies, while attending to the questions of beneficiaries still focus mainly on the allocation of resources and privileges rather than the outcomes such allocations have for the quality of life experienced by different groups or individuals (1977, p. 325)

Looking at research on the politics of education, which focused on the structure of school governance, Hawley notes that "almost none of this research deals with the impact of different institutions and actors on the quality of life in public...few scholars examine the impact of school politics on the learning environments children experience, much less the effects such political activity has on what children learn." (p. 327) Certainly, since Hawley wrote this article, state and

national standards movements have focused political attention on curriculum content--or the *what* that students learn. However, there is still scant attention paid to learning environments--the *how* of learning-- by policy makers and policy researchers. Instead these policymakers make a leap of faith in assuming that the creation of standards or any other policy will have the intended impact within schools. Hawley adds: "Most political scientists do not approach problem solving by looking back from the point of impact to examine alternative explanations for political outcomes. Perhaps this is because they tend to see political activity most clearly when it is focused on or encompassed by institutions that are nominally political." (p. 328) Our study starts at the school site, and then explores context in an attempt to better our comprehension of the forces at work and the processes in place within the schools.

Rogers and Whetten (1982) argue for use of multilevel analytical frameworks when studying interorganizational relationships. They give examples of how critical it is to dig deep beneath the surface in order to get the entire story. For instance, what supervisors say is not necessarily what line workers do, and how teachers describe the constraints affecting their reform efforts are not necessarily reflective of the true political constraints limiting their efforts.

Mitchell (1980) argues that one of the primary reasons for studying schools' contexts is to develop a solid understanding of the ideologies at play in the district. He states:

> ...an adequate understanding of school governance and management must involve a theoretical framework which brings ideological beliefs into proper focus. Only after the ideological belief systems of district citizens, school board members, and professional educators have been effectively mapped can we expect to understand and predict how governance decisions will be made or educational programs enacted in the schools. (p. 443)

One way of understanding ideology is by identifying "condensation symbols" which Mitchell says "describe the basic contribution of ideological thought to resolving the problem of political representation." (p. 444) They link policy makers and constituents by providing a symbol that, although often distorting the issue at stake, crystallizes the focus of both groups on a particular

issue. Mitchell recites a long history of condensation symbols in educational politics including such notions as "the melting pot," "equality of educational opportunity" and "competency."

Condensation symbols are closely related to Sears et. al. (1979) notion of "symbolic politics" -- a newer, more subtle form of racism that manifests itself in whites' opposition to race-specific policies but is disguised as simple self-interest. Sears et. al. found that whites' opposition to school desegregation policy was more strongly correlated with their racial attitudes than with any real cost to their well-being. For instance, whites who were more "conservative" in their racial attitudes were more likely to oppose school desegregation policies even if they did not have children in public schools or own property in a district undergoing desegregation. In this way "busing" became a political symbol of what these whites opposed on an ideological level. Of course, the key point in understanding symbolic politics is in identifying how they affect the behavior of citizens in voting and other means of influencing policy.

We have seen examples of condensation symbols and symbolic politics at play in our schools. It is critical that we identify the symbols driving policy making in each community, in order to interpret our data accurately, and avoid misinterpreting phenomena and people's motivations. With many of our schools, we are entering communities that have very different political and social traditions from those with which we are familiar. Thus it behooves us to spend adequate time getting a handle on ideologies and symbols, as well as the histories and politics of our schools and their communities.

Ramsey (1978) warns that comprehending all aspects of a school's context is difficult, and the particularly deep issues are especially hard to ferret out. "More prevalent and more difficult to ascertain is the nature of conflict, change and deviance within the educational system. The educational system and the role of individuals, within groups and among groups, are perhaps best noted by the dissonance exhibited in perception, viewpoint, and mythical representation." (p. 5) However, it is important that these meanings be explicated, much like the symbols referenced above. Ramsey compares how the role of the superintendent in districts can range from that of hero to fall guy, much like the way the meaning of the Raven, a socio-religious icon for many

North American native groups, varies from prankster to a destructive, powerful figure. A danger for researchers is assuming that the terms people in schools use mean the same thing in all contexts. For instance, we have seen variations in the social construction of the roles of superintendents, school boards, parents and school site staff in our schools and districts. The differences in these roles and their meanings impacts directly on the school reform process; we have schools that can make drastic changes seemingly without the intervention or concern of the superintendent, and others that can hardly make any alterations without first consulting and gaining the approval of the school board or district superintendent.

Benson (1982) discusses the drawbacks of the common approach to researching interorganizational relationships, which he calls "the problematic." The problematic is de-contextualized in character, and thus does not concern itself with theory about the larger social context. He warns that de-contextualized research can be appropriated by those whose interests and power make it useful to them. Certainly, ignoring context in education research opens the doors for findings to be misinterpreted and misused. For example, proponents of school vouchers argue that economic theories of competition can be applied in efforts to improve public education. In doing this they ignore the social and economic barriers that parents, particularly those in low-income and low-status communities face in efforts to exercise choice.

Part of our effort to go beyond the school site, especially to reach less-empowered and less-involved parents, is to include their voice and their perceptions in our description of the school-level reforms. Without these voices, we could not verify the educators' claims that they have tried to involve parents of low-achieving students, when we know that politically, they have little incentive to do so. Mohanty (1994) discusses how education represents "both a struggle for meaning and a struggle over power relations. Thus, education becomes a central terrain where power and politics operate out of the lived culture of individuals and groups situated in asymmetrical social and political positions." (p. 147)

For us to comprehend fully the complex nature of our schools, their contexts, and the change processes underway, we need to incorporate the voices and experiences of persons from

all socio-political strata in the district, instead of limiting our scope to those who have power, like policymakers or administrators. Many of the past studies of policymaking and politics in school districts focused only on the experiences and opinions of the board members and superintendents, like that done by McCarty & Ramsey (1971). Such works omitted how those not in power were affected by and involved in the political struggles described, or how they defined what happened. Mohanty notes that in the higher education establishment there are larger issues that need to be addressed, including "questions of self and collective knowledge of marginal people and the recovery of alternative, oppositional histories of domination and struggle." (p. 147) In our efforts to understand what happening in our schools and how it is affecting people from all parts of the community, we are attempting to give a voice to all of the players, not just the elite decisionmakers. We've tried to incorporate the voices of less-involved or efficacious parents and students, as well as those of community members outside of the traditional power structure into our work.

What is the Appropriate Balance?

We agree fully with the general sentiment expressed in the previous section, it is important that we understand both what is happening within our schools and the external forces impacting on the reform efforts we are examining. We took this multi-level approach not because of the influence of any one research paradigm, but rather because we are a multidisciplinary group of researchers which naturally has taken an interdisciplinary approach to studying our schools. We come from, and have accessed studies and methodologies from a multitude of fields including Sociology, Political Science, Psychology, Anthropology and History.

We are visiting each of the ten schools in our study 3 times over a two year period. Generally, two researchers conduct each site visit over a 3 day period. Thus, our average total research time in the schools is approximately 18 workdays. While this is not an inconsiderable amount of time, it is still limiting enough to force us to make some careful choices about how we spend our time, and who we choose to speak with.

In our case study we have interviewed people both within and outside of each school site. Although the bulk of our time has been spent within each school, speaking with school site administrators, teachers, counselors, and students, we have also spent time speaking with district staff and community members. While within schools we have been systematic about who we have spoken with, we have not been so consistent in who we have spoken to outside the school, because each context differs dramatically. At all sites we have talked to parents, but who we have interviewed with in the district has varied widely. For most schools we have spoken with Superintendents, school board members, members of business community if involved, and community leaders (e.g. religious figures, local higher education people) if appropriate or available. However, in some cases it has not been feasible or necessary to speak with representatives of all of these categories. Indeed, while schools are for the most part consistent in how they are structured--all have principals, teachers, counselors of some fashion and students--district and community structures differ considerably. Since contexts vary, it is impossible to replicate exactly the people we have interviewed across school sites.

We are also constrained by time and resources. Time spent interviewing district staff and policy makers is time not spent studying in the schools. This dilemma is especially significant in our larger schools, where the staff size numbers well over 100, and scheduling time to interview a representative sample is often difficult. We try to schedule interviews with parents, district personnel and policy makers during after school hours and evenings, but this time is often limited, and we cannot expect people to always be willing to give us their non-working time.

Because our project is longitudinal, and includes multiple site visits, we've been able to gain both virtually unlimited access within our schools and the trust of those we are studying. Through this process we have been able to figure out key figures to interview. Initially, our choice of interviewees was determined through our school contact person, who sent materials describing the school, its history, the current class schedule and teaching assignments. For our first visits, we generally negotiated who we would speak with, trusting the judgment of our contacts. We tried to get a sense of both the history of the reform movement underway as well as

insight into where things were heading. In most of our schools, a greater proportion of our time was spent speaking with district staff and school board members during these first visits than in the subsequent two visits. We then used many of our initial interviewees as informants regarding who we should interview next.

We have applied a combination of what Merriam (1990) calls "quota selection," in which we "identify the major relevant sub groups and then obtain some arbitrary number of participants in each category" (pp. 49-50), and "network selection," where "the sample is collected on the basis of participant referrals" (p. 50). We have also employed what she terms "reputational case selection," in which "instances are chosen on the recommendation of experienced experts in the area, such as the principal chooses students based on researchers requirements " (p. 50). Finally, we have tried to do "comparable case selection," the process of "selecting individuals, groups, sites and so forth on the same relevant characteristics over a period of time in order to compare results. The ethnographers version of replication." (pp. 50-51)

Thus, a critical question becomes then how much do we need to know about the school's context? How much time spent outside of the school is enough? How much information is enough? The answers to these questions vary by school, and we do not believe that a formula is appropriate in answering them. Rather, each researcher must determine what makes sense in each school, through the process of study at each site. The following are brief descriptions of the social, political and historical contexts of two schools in our project, and some preliminary analysis of how these contexts affect the detracking efforts underway. They serve to illustrate that there is no one formula for gathering this critical information, the uniqueness of each context is evident even in these short passages. However, it is also obvious that contextual knowledge is critical to our ability to analyze the phenomena we are observing in these schools.

Context and Our Schools: Two Examples

Union High School

> ...about eight years, six, seven, eight years ago they had a massive consolidation plan that closed the high schools and would have built three or four Union Highs, and when you see Union High School tomorrow you'll see why we could take nine schools and just have three or four of those and serve all of the high school students in this state, and really be progressive. Um, that was that plan. Well, they shot that down, they didn't want to lose their high schools, so then the new consolidation plan, it was development with parent input, hundreds of committees in every feeder area, OK, they decided they were gonna hold those high schools, go to middle schools, and close some elementaries. Well, the Save Our Schools group surfaces, they don't think you should close elementaries, they think you should close high schools. So, I mean, it's just, it's always special interest groups. We had a very large textbook controversy in 1974, the miners came out, picketed the schools, there were guns, there were bombs, I mean, a lot of awful things happened, and since that time, every school board election has a special interest group. And uh, it's really been sad to watch, what's it's done to the system, it is very bad, and uh, so anyway, Save Our Schools came out, and now they think you should close high schools, so now we're back, the pendulum's over that way.
>
> Vice Principal in charge of instruction, Union High School

Union High School is located in the Appalachian region of the country, in a moderately sized city. It's population of 1400 students is approximately 28% African American and 68% Caucasian, with a handful of students from other races and nationalities. The school opened in a brand new building five years ago as the consolidation of two aging, inner-city high schools. At Union, the number of tracks is reduced from what existed at the two closed schools, there are only a regular and an advanced track, and most of the special education students have been mainstreamed into the regular track. The tracking structure is less rigid than in most schools, students can be in advanced and regular classes simultaneously, and there is some movement of students from regular level to advanced level courses as they progress through their high school career. As in most schools, minority students are underrepresented in advanced classes, on average 15% of the students in advanced classes are African American. However, this varies by subject area. Race relations among the students are good at the school, there seem to be few signs of tension or conflict, and interracial friendships are the norm.

The historical and socio-political context in which Union operates is one of constant conflict and upheaval. In the two years we have been there the district has had three superintendents; the first one resigned shortly after our second visit, and she had been under fire from the day her contract was awarded; the acting interim superintendent, who had been with the district some 30 odd years quit after a few months, and the current superintendent was hired a few months ago. At least two school board members have resigned within the last three years, and the controversy over the replacement for one of the members included the appointment of one person who had a conflict of interest and was forced to resign the day after taking office.

Teachers, administrators, district staff and parents all point to one event in their schools' history as both the defining moment in the district and the reason for their political instability. In the early 1970s, a textbook controversy arose over whether or not school books were anti-Christian, turning the district upside down. Since that time superintendents have lasted on average less than two years and the school board has changed membership several times. Currently, the most heated debate in the district is over consolidation of schools, an issue that has been problematic since before the textbook controversy. The district has lost a large portion of its student population due to outmigration, and a number of schools are operating with extremely low student population, under 100 at some elementary schools and as few as 400 in some high schools. Still, many in the district cling to the notion of neighborhood schools, and the first superintendent we met lost her job because of school consolidation.

Another layer in the context surrounding Union is the issue of race. The district's schools were "integrated" in the late 1950s. However, the board did not create racially-balanced schools throughout the district. Rather, nearly all of the African American students were sent to the two downtown high schools and their feeder schools, and the remainder of the schools in the district are virtually all-white. When a new, then state of the art high school was built in the early 1960s, a new attendance zone was carved out of the area feeding the two inner-city, integrated high schools, and an all-white, upper socio-economic status zone and school were created.

Union serves nearly all of the African American students in the district, as well as a large number of low-income white students, in a large, modern, technologically advanced building built on a choice piece of land slightly outside of the city. The school was over ten years in the making, because of delays and controversies in the design and locating of the site. Union High School has achieved a great deal of success with its population, increasing college attendance rates from around 30% at the closed high schools to close to 60%. It has attained National School of Excellence status, and its athletic teams have won a number of state championships in a variety of sports. The schools' success is due to a number of factors; the faculty and administration were hand-picked and received a great deal of pre-service training before the school opened, the administration and a number of teachers were involved in designing the schools' innovative curriculum delivery model and the school site itself, and the school received a large amount of grant money to help pay for extra resources and training for the new programs.

However, Union High School is not well liked or supported within its district, by people living outside of its attendance zone. Many regard the school as having received more than their fare share of the district's funds. They resent the provision of a beautiful new facility to low-income, African American students, and they are jealous of the academic and athletic success Union has enjoyed. The school presents the impression of being under constant attack and feels as though it is trying to build walls around it, and become a fortress.

Union High School is in a delicate position within this heated and unstable context, and this affects the reform efforts and how people view them within the school. In order to comprehend how Union approaches reform and addresses issues related to race and ability, as is our goal in this study, we have to understand the influences and limitations of the local context. In addition, we have needed to confirm what people at the school tell us, about issues such as how the community views the school, what the politics and policies are in the district which affect the school, and the reasons behind some of the more difficult or baffling decisions they have made. Much of this we have found out through board members, administrators, superintendent(s), parents, and other community members. There are stories that parents have

told that no one else shared, such as descriptions of the race riots in the district's high schools in the late 1960s. There are details about the school's history that only people in the district office knew. We also gained a deeper understanding of the meanings of symbols like race, the textbook controversy, and school consolidation, which we did not have a handle on after talking to people within the school.

Delving into the large context helps us understand the true meaning of detracking. Although a district administrator, with the consent of the vice principal applied to have Union participate in our study of detracking, and people understood that this was our area of interest, few people in the school or the district even focus on this topic. For instance, even as people admit that the racial balance in the advanced track does not reflect the balance at the school, with minorities underrepresented, they don't seem overly concerned about this apparent inequity. Without understanding the other pressures on the school, we might argue that these educators were either somewhat ignorant or even racist. However, we know that the reasons such issues are not addressed are far more complex than racism or ignorance. The school is under enormous pressure to succeed, and teachers and administrators focus much more on maintaining and protecting their school than on critically examining what is happening in their classes. There is an undercurrent of a deeper, critical awareness of what is happening, but most seemed to feel that this could not be addressed so long as Union was under attack from the outside.

It has taken three visits over two years time to peel away the layers of political, social and historical context within which Union operates. Until mid-way through the first visit, it was hard even to know who to speak with, aside from those our contact person told us were central. Moreover, not until the third visit did we fully comprehend those questions we needed to ask and to whom we needed to pose them regarding some of the most difficult and emotionally charged issues around race. We were not clear until the final trip about the history of race relations in the district, and the race-related conflicts that people had not shared with us. We began to gain a better picture of how the community understood and defined Union, as well as getting a sense of how the school perceived itself. In addition, some of our district sources shared insight into the

internal workings of the school that individuals within the site were not willing or able to convey to us. The story we will tell about Union's efforts to detrack after this final visit is very different from that we would have told a year ago.

Plainview High School

In order to understand Plainview High School's effort to detrack -- or more importantly the barriers to these efforts -- we have to place the school within its larger historical and political context, particularly in regard to the role that race has played in this community for the last 150 years. Plainview High is the only high school in the suburban Plainview School District, nestled into a predominantly white and wealthy section of a large (2.4 million population) metropolitan area in the southern midwest. The metro area is sharply divided by a city-county line that was drawn centuries ago, and despite the city's efforts to incorporate the county in late 19th century, remains a distinct barrier between what have become white and wealthy suburbs and the mostly black and poor city.

Plainview existed as a separate farming town before the suburbs grew up around it. While the physical and economic remnants of this small agrarian society have all but vanished into this bedroom community of half-acre lots with three- and four-bedroom homes, the tradition of Plainview as a distinct entity from the larger city has fostered a small-town culture in the midst of a bustling metro area. Another important aspect of Plainview's history that distinguishes it from most of the predominantly white and middle- to upper-middle-class suburbs nearby is a small, about five-block by five-block, neighborhood in the southeast corner of the town known as Beacher Park. Although Beacher Park was incorporated into the town of Plainview a few years ago, it remains separate and unequal in many respects. Decidedly less affluent than the rest of the community, Beacher Park has quietly co-existed within the white and wealthy of Plainview since the days of slavery. Since Emancipation, the blacks who remained in Beacher Park have worked mainly as house servants and farm hands to the wealthy families of Plainview.

Before the Supreme Court *Brown* decision in 1954, the Plainview schools were segregated, and because the district only had one high school, black secondary students were shipped to a neighboring district that ran a separate black high school. They also had the option of taking a trolley into the city to attend one of the all-black high schools there. Immediately after *Brown*, the Plainview district "desegregated" at the secondary level by allowing black students to attend the high school, albeit in racially distinct classrooms. This desegregation left Plainview with an enrollment that was about 15 percent black.

In 1983, Plainview and 16 other predominantly white suburban school districts entered into a District Court settlement agreement to create a metropolitan-wide desegregation program that would allow African-American students from the city to transfer to suburban schools. Through this program, 140 African-American transfer students attend Plainview High School, and bring with them a state "incentive payment" equal to Plainview's per pupil cost of $4,500. The combination of the Beacher Park students and the transfer students from the city creates a 25 percent African-American population in the school. Both Beacher Park and transfer students tend to come from much lower-income families than the white students whose parents are generally either professionals or managers in one of the large corporations in the metropolitan area.

Thus, while Plainview has a racially-mixed student body, the African-American and the white students come from "different worlds" as the teachers and students describe it. Even the students who grew up in Beacher Park and have attended desegregated Plainview elementary and middle schools carry the label of the Other -- the students who live in the small black ghetto shoved into one corner of an otherwise lilly white district. The students from the city are even more alienated. As far as the suburban white students and parents are concerned, the African-American students who transfer in from the infamous "city" -- the place portrayed on the evening news as violent and lawless -- are to be pitied and avoided. Sitting next to black students in classes in Plainview -- as opposed to the mostly white A.P. and honors classes -- is a symbol of failure for most high-achieving and upwardly mobile white students. Consciously or subconsciously, it's a symbol that you are no better than the students and the culture you and your

family have looked down upon for centuries, no better than the black neighbors that whites fled from in the city, and no better than the black people who were denigrated to rationalize the growth of mostly white suburban communities such as Plainview.

Closely linked to these racial attitudes is the fear, particularly on the part of many administrators and teachers at the high school, that Plainview will become like the "city" (a euphemism for mostly black) as have some of the suburbs just over the city-county line. In fact, four of the five administrators, including the principal, and several of the teachers in the high school worked in one of these suburbs, in the Hamilton School District, during the 70s and early 80s. The student population in Hamilton, a small, once-elite district shifted from all-white and upper-middle-class to all-black lower-middle to poor in a matter of 10 years -- roughly between 1968 and 1978. Massive white flight at a rate never before seen in "the county" shocked the educators and graduates of Hamilton High. The status of the district and its sole high school plummeted in the late 1950s and through most of the 1960s. Once regarded as the premier public high school in the metropolitan area, Hamilton now serves as a reminder, a symbol for parents and educators in high status suburban schools across the county, of how close they are to that which they were trying to escape.

For the Plainview High educators who are refugees from the Hamilton district, these memories of white flight and the resulting decline in the prestige of a high school they were once so proud to be a part of, inhibits their efforts to detrack Plainview High. Throughout the county, but especially in the Plainview district, mere mention of Hamilton and "what happened there" serves as a not-so-subtle reminder of the need to appease white parents.

Given this context and history, we should not be surprised to find that Plainview's detracking reforms are at a virtual standstill. Having eliminated lowest-level, remedial classes in all subjects a few years ago and moved only two tracks in English and Social Studies -- either regular or honors in 9th and 10th grade and regular or A.P. in 11th and 12th -- the administration and most of the teachers feel that they have gone as far as they can go with detracking. Through our interviews with parents, community members and district officials, as well as observations of PTA

Council meetings and Parent Coffees, we better understand the pressure on the educators to maintain the top tracks. The white and wealthy parents of the honors and AP students are the political force in this suburban community. They are the social successors to the first white parents who fled the Hamilton district to private and whiter suburban schools in the late 60s. These parents, as the power base of the white community in Plainview tell us that if it weren't for the separate AP and honors classes, they would pull their children out of Plainview High School. These are the parents with the resources to leave. The principal of Plainview High described how these parents' threats have paralyzed efforts to detrack the school.

> .... I'm convinced, though, that the way to do that [create equal opportunities for black and white students]...is not...to...drop something, which most of the supportive...*really* [with emphasis] supportive parents of this district, who support with their money, and their time, and their influence, I am convinced, I do this district and every resident in it no good...if I all of the sudden say, "OK, we're gonna drop all our AP's," because then, everybody's gonna say, "this school has gone to hell." Once they say it's gone to hell, they move, and I have done nothing. I have... I've waged the war. I may have won a battle. I can drop AP's. I've lost the war. I didn't come here to this...school district to lose a war. I came here, because I thought...after seeing [Hamilton], which has struggled, and struggled and struggled...the racial equality, and good relations, and which, when I was there, in '76 through '79, had the most bitter fights between Blacks and whites. Bitter fights. Every single board member...board meeting, rather, was awful. I went away sick at my stomach every single board meeting. Then went to school each day, and we got along fine. Well, we did fight, it was problems. And then went back to the board meeting...and...and Black parents would come and tear us up for how racist we were....it was amazing to me. And whites would say, "listen...our kids are in the AP classes here because they're working, and doing the work. The...they're trying." And the Black parents would say, "no, you're keepin' my kid out because you're a racist." And the white parents say, "your kid isn't yet doin' the work to get in that class." And the Black parents say, "you hadn't helped him do the work," and truthfully, there were all kinds of truths on all kinds of sides, but it was gettin no better. It was terrible. I came here...not to have that happen. I came here to get us all to go together...that way. That's why I came.

To study Plainview High School without comprehending its larger historical and political context, without making the connection between this context and racial attitudes of powerful parents and policy makers, especially as they relate to detracking, could lead to us to "blame the victims." With this broader understanding, we see the educators who do not push hard enough

to detrack schools as victims of a society in which racism and symbolic politics are not created, but rather perpetuated, by the administrators and teachers we study.

Conclusion

These brief examples from our study help to illustrate the importance of our ability as researchers to place our schools and their detracking efforts in their social, political, and historical context. Our interdisciplinary focus has enabled us to both realize and attempt this. We are not trying to reinvent the wheel in our research. Many who study education argue that it is critical to focus on reform efforts as implemented in the school because that is the place "where the rubber meets the road." However, we have learned from sociologists and political scientists and their research on education politics and policymaking at the local level that community type and the issues being debated affect the decisionmaking process. At the same time anthropologists and education researchers have shed valuable light on what happens within the "black box" of schools.

In this era of decentralization in educational governance, the local context is becoming increasingly important in education reform movements. We must link and advance research on local context with inquiry into change processes within schools. The question is, how do we do this given our time constraints and finite resources? There is no simple answer to this question, there is not a formula or a checklist we can offer. Instead, each researcher must seek out the information necessary to make sense of change processes within the school, the socio-political and historical context surrounding it, and the interactions between the two. We must discover meanings which are not grounded in our preconceived notions of the forces that affect change but rather emerge from the voices and perceptions of persons in the schools and communities we are investigating.

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